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ABSTRACT

The 1980s were dubbed "The Decade of Hispanics" by the news media, who realized that the rapid growth of the Hispanic American population could be used by them to demand equitable political empowerment and full participation in American social, economic, and educational life. But Hispanics did not move as rapidly as observers had predicted because the diverse groups comprising the Hispanic community required the early part of the decade to develop a collective awareness. It was not until the latter part of the 1980s that their leadership could focus on a national political agenda. Political influence was reflected by an increase in the number of Hispanic elected officials and the appointment of several Hispanics to high-level government positions. Hispanic affluence increased, Hispanic businesses proliferated, and the Hispanic consumer market also grew. However, the following shortfalls and losses are also noted: (1) an anti-Hispanic backlash, including immigration restrictions and the English Only Movement; (2) an increase in Hispanic poverty and unemployment levels; and (3) a serious decline in Hispanic educational attainment levels and the loss of bilingual education programs. The Cuban American community was negatively affected by the decision to cease granting automatic exile status to Cubans, the use of immigration as a negotiating tool between the United States and Cuba, and the deportation to Cuba of non-Mariel Cuban immigrants. The Cuban American school dropout rate increased as did participation in juvenile gangs. However, Cuban Americans experienced political, economic, and professional growth. Statistical data are included on five graphs. (FMW)

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The 1980's Decade of Hispanics?

THE ELUSIVE DECADE of HISPANICS

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The Elusive Decade Of Hispanics

Cuban American
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Miami, Florida
Fall 1989

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"The Elusive Decade of Hispanics" highlights key issues and outcomes that shaped this community during the 1980s.

Data used in this report were obtained from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, National Council of La Raza, Metro-Dade Planning Department, City of Miami Police Department, Hispanic Policy Development Project, National Center for Health Statistics, and the Cuban American National Council: Fourth National Conference.

The conclusions based on the data, and its analysis, are the sole responsibility of the Cuban American Policy Center and CNC.

Efforts to synthesize complex issues are bound to miss some aspects, even important aspects of reality. This is particularly true when a ten-year period is under scrutiny.

On the other hand, CNC feels that addressing the question of whether the 1980s were or were not "the decade of Hispanics" serves a useful purpose and should be done succinctly for the benefit of the general reader. Our analysis of several policy issues seeks a balanced answer to and a clearer understanding of the central question asked herein.

Beyond that, we hope that this paper will stimulate further discussion of the matter, and will increase the public's interest in the affairs of Hispanics in the United States.

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The Decade of Hispanics

During the 1980s the U.S. Hispanic population reached the 20 million mark. The media was quick to recognize the event as newsworthy. Hence, Hispanics were "discovered" in the 1980s and the general public was amazed that a virtually ignored group suddenly had become the nation's fastest growing minority.

So widespread and frequent was the media coverage that the period was dubbed "the decade of Hispanics," and it was anticipated that Hispanics would seize the opportunity to turn their numbers into equitable political empowerment and full participation in the nation's social, economic, and educational life.

But Hispanics did not move as rapidly as outside observers had predicted. United by a common language and by their roots in nations that were colonized by Spain, Hispanics are divided by country of origin, the recency and nature of their entry into the United States, race, age, class, and the regions of the United States in which they live. These differences are considerable, and in the early years of the decade the groups were still developing a collective awareness of themselves as "Hispanics." It was not until the latter part of the 1980s that their leadership began to focus on a *national* Hispanic agenda and to seriously consider the potential benefits that could be derived from the nation's deepening interest in Hispanic issues.

The closing of the decade offers an opportunity to look back. Did "the decade of Hispanics" fulfill its promise? What was set in motion? Where did it fall short of expectations? What was achieved? What lies ahead?

What Did Hispanics Expect?

The issues pursued by Hispanics in the 1980s reflected their desire to become active players in the U.S. pluralistic society and to participate fully in the "American Dream." Although the leadership dealt with a wide range of concerns, attention was focused most strongly on employment, education, the preservation of the Hispanic heritage and cultural values, and a quest for equitable political representation.

Forceful advocacy campaigns were undertaken by Hispanics at the local, state and federal levels. Few concrete, measurable goals, however, were established to evaluate progress toward parity. For instance, benchmarks were neither identified nor periodically adjusted to reflect the increasing Hispanic percentage of the total U.S. population. No baselines—1980 or earlier—were established for poverty levels or unemployment rates. The accelerated increase required to bring Hispanic per capita income to parity with mainstream citizens was not calculated at a rate above that of the general population. Goals for high school graduation and college attendance rates were not related to general population levels. The national annual GNP growth rate was not adopted—as it might have been—as a comparative standard in measuring growth among the top 100 Hispanic business firms.

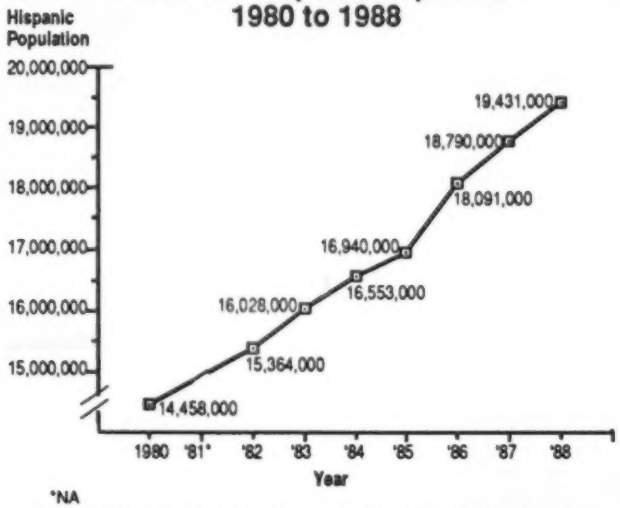
While it is true that the achievement of certain agreed-upon goals and benchmarks would not have painted a full picture of how Hispanics fared in the '80s, their near total absence means that the gains and shortcomings can be measured only in isolation. Important tools that might have been used to determine whether the 1980s were in fact "the decade of Hispanics" were not developed and a significant opportunity was lost.

The Numbers

The national and local attention Hispanics attracted in the 1980s was stimulated by a remarkable increase in the Hispanic population.

In less than a decade the Hispanic percentage of the total U.S. population rose from 6.5 percent to 8.1 percent. Between 1980 and 1988 Hispanics experienced a 34 percent growth rate, compared to an 8 percent general-population growth rate. The numbers increased from 14.5 million in 1980 to 19.4 million in 1988. In fact, Hispanics became the nation's second largest ethnic/racial minority, surpassed only by Black Americans.

Chart 1
Growth of Hispanic Population
1980 to 1988



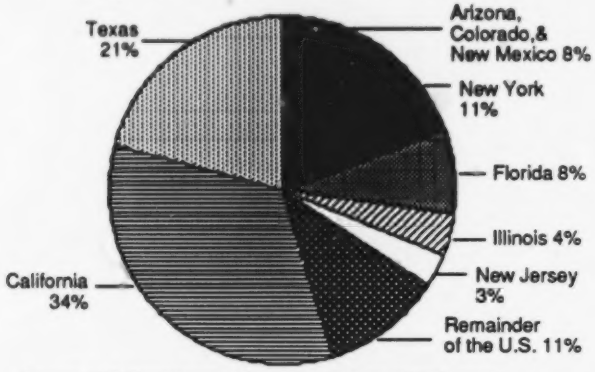
*NA
Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census/CNC

The increase in the Hispanic population can be attributed to a steady flow of immigrants and to high birth rates.

In the late '80s Hispanics accounted for over a third of all U.S. immigration. It is estimated that over the decade the number of Hispanic immigrants to the United States—documented and undocumented—averaged 250,000 net annually. In 1988 1.7 million U.S. Hispanics sought legalization under the amnesty promulgated by the Immigration Reform and Citizenship Act, which granted legalization to long-term undocumented residents.

The Hispanic birth rate was 23.3 per thousand in 1987, compared to a 16.6 per thousand birth rate for the general population. And Hispanics, who have a median age of 25, are the youngest population in the United States. Young Hispanic women are moving into their childbearing years while the general population ages.

Chart 2
Geographic Distribution of the Hispanic Population: March 1988



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census

But the impact of Hispanics is based on more than numbers. It is strongly influenced by concentration. Over half of all U.S. Hispanics live in just two states, California and Texas. And 89 percent live in only nine states—California, Texas, New York, Illinois, Florida, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and New Jersey. Over half

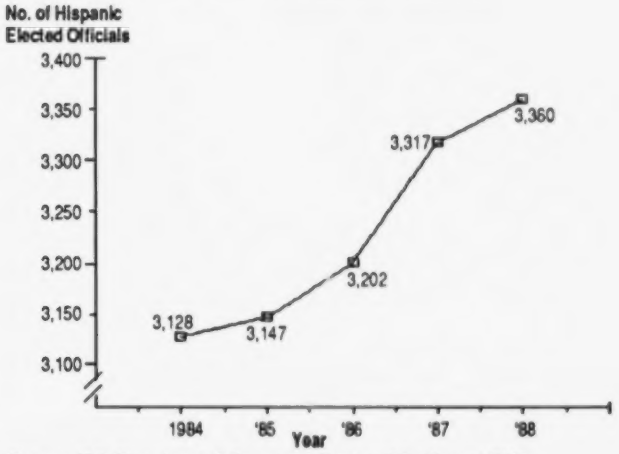
the Hispanics reside in seven metropolitan areas: New York, Chicago, Miami, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Houston. In many of these markets, Hispanics constitute a large percentage of the population and are becoming the majority of students enrolled in public schools.

The Gains

• *Political Representation*

The decade proved that Hispanics are actively seeking and slowly gaining political representation. In 1984 the number of Hispanic elected officials in the nation was 3,128; by 1988 that figure had increased by approximately 7 percent, to 3,360. However, those 3,360 Hispanic elected officials amounted to less than 1 percent of the nation's elected officials, far below the 8.1 percent of the total population that Hispanics constituted in that year.

Chart 3
Hispanic Elected Officials



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census/CNC

Population concentration supported the increase of Hispanic political influence at the state and, above all, at the local level where, in many instances, Hispanics became the dominant or "swing" vote.

By 1988—

- 230 Hispanics were mayors,
- 1,425 were county and municipal officials,
- 120 were state legislators,
- 1,226 were education or school board officials, and
- 11 were U.S. Representatives.

Hispanic influence also has been reflected in the appointment of several Hispanics to high-level government positions, for example, Lauro Cavazos as U.S. Secretary of Education and Manuel Lujan as U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

Voter registration and turn-out rates remained relatively stable during the decade. However, any assessment of Hispanic registration and voting rates must take into consideration the fact that 40 percent of Hispanics are too young to vote, and that 33 percent of Hispanics of voting age are ineligible to vote because they are not U.S. citizens. Actually, between 1980 and 1988, registration of eligible Hispanics edged up from 53.6 percent to 56.6 percent. The increase is attributable to extensive voter registration campaigns conducted throughout the nation by groups such as the Southwest/Midwest/Northeast voter registration projects and to spirited voter registration efforts by Cuban Americans. At the same time, in some elections Cubans achieved 80 percent turn-out rates.

- *Economic Gains*

Some economic gains made by Hispanics over the decade were encouraging. In 1980 only 2.3 percent of Hispanic households qualified as affluent (with pre-tax

incomes of $50,000 or more). By 1986 that figure had quadrupled, reaching 9.2 percent, higher than the Black figure of 6.9 percent and more than half of the general population level of 16.8 percent. Close to 60 percent of affluent Hispanics hold education-intensive positions as professionals and managers, underscoring the key role that education plays in expanding the Hispanic affluent sector.

Entrepreneurship and business also showed promising growth over the decade. In 1982, nationwide, Hispanic-owned businesses numbered 248,000. Hispanics from New York to Los Angeles held retail, wholesale, trade, and manufacturing firms that reached a combined output of $15 billion. But in some areas, Miami for example, many medium-sized and small Hispanic firms remained mostly ethnic, catering mainly to the Hispanic market. By the latter part of the decade, the slow growth and job generation of these ethnic firms had attracted the attention and concern of community leaders and economists. Many saw the need to stimulate growth by penetrating the general market, a shift that would require initiative, new outlooks, and, in some cases, new human and capital resources.

As Hispanic affluence increased and Hispanic businesses proliferated, the Hispanic consumer market grew. By 1989, it had reached $171 billion, fueled by the rapid increase in the number of young consumers, and enlarged by a steady stream of immigrants. Demand for basic household consumer goods and services was accelerated, spurring the development of national Spanish-language media—radio, newspapers, magazines, and two television networks—that were key in promoting and expanding the concept of a national Hispanic market.

The Hispanic market, in fact, became so important to the nation's top corporations that they began to devise specialized services aimed at Hispanics, including nationwide Spanish-language marketing campaigns. Simultaneously, in an effort to meet their community

responsibilities, these corporations supported many programs serving Hispanics—including childcare, adopt-a-school, dropout prevention, job-training, scholarship, and mentoring programs.

One of the most significant outgrowths of the rising corporate interest in the Hispanic market was the increased employment of Hispanics who could help management understand the characteristics and needs of the Hispanic communities.

The Shortfalls and Losses

• *The Anti-Hispanic Backlash*

The decade's high levels of immigration increased the ambivalence and apprehension with which many U.S. citizens view newcomers. While some Americans welcomed the new resources brought by Hispanic immigrant skilled workers, others argued that the United States could no longer absorb so many foreigners. Still others feared that "these foreigners," particularly the non-European/non-Whites, would subvert America's established customs and traditions because they would not assimilate successfully into the mainstream.

For all these reasons, Hispanics in the 1980s came to feel the pressure of a selective, national, anti-immigrant sentiment. Drastic steps were suggested—physical barriers at the U.S./Mexican border, for example, and preference quotas for European immigrants. Anti-Hispanic public statements made by "English Only" and "Official English" advocates exemplified an emerging national resistance to massive immigration from Latin American countries. The visibility and attention that had helped promote a Hispanic agenda also served to plant seeds of concern that have developed into an anti-Hispanic backlash.

Amidst this backlash came the withdrawal of the refugee status which Cubans had enjoyed for three decades—ever since a communist regime took control of the

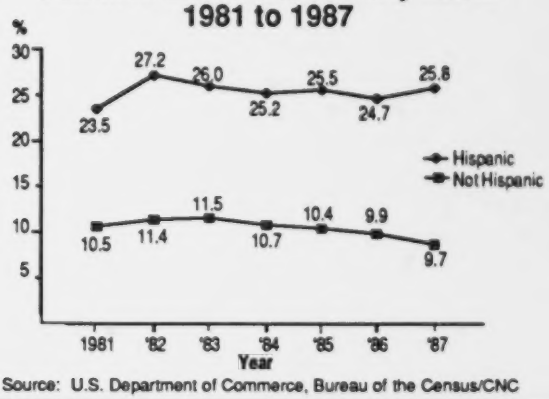
Cuban government. When riots at the Oakdale and Atlanta prisons focused national attention on the 7,600 Cuban inmates from the port of Mariel, the image of Cuban Americans took a sharp turn for the worse in the eyes of the U.S. public.

• *Increase In Poverty*

Although the affluent Hispanic sector expanded in the '80s, economic indicators pointed to an overall decline in Hispanic income. A dual Hispanic reality began to emerge—one in which a few were becoming well-off while most were dropping below the national average.

The Hispanic communities did not fully recover from the economic recession and budgetary cutbacks of the early 1980s. Hispanic poverty rates increased during the recession and did not return to pre-recession levels. Moreover, the Hispanic unemployment rate hovered at an average 3.8 percentage points above that of the general population for most of the decade. In addition underemployment—particularly among women—continued to be a serious problem.

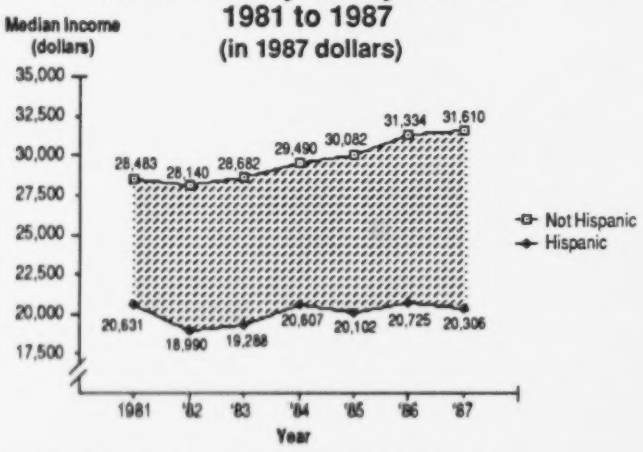
Chart 4
Families Below the Poverty Level
1981 to 1987



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census/CNC

Government and private reports released in the late '80s clearly indicate the gravity of the situation. In 1981 23.5 percent of Hispanic families were considered poor; by 1987 the figure had risen to 25.8 percent. Hispanic family income had declined and had fallen below Black family income, and 40 percent of all Hispanic children were living in poverty. In 1987 the median family income for Hispanics stood at $20,306, well below the $31,610 median for non-Hispanics.

Chart 5
Median Family Money Income: 1981 to 1987
(in 1987 dollars)



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census/CNC

The downward trend can be attributed to a number of factors—low educational attainment, lack of job experience, high levels of immigration that add new workers at the lower end of the job market, increases in female-headed households, and structural changes in the labor market.

• *Education*

Educational attainment, the single most important factor in Hispanic economic advancement, did not improve in the 1980s. In 1988 Hispanics lagged behind in most educational attainment measurements and, as a group, Hispanics were the least educated people in the nation. *If no change takes place, it is estimated that half the Hispanic population will be functionally illiterate by 1990.*

The serious achievement problems so many Hispanic children suffer in elementary school reflect their lack of preparation for the requirements of the U.S. school system. Most need preschool experience, yet only a little over a quarter of Hispanic children are enrolled in any sort of preschool program.

By the time Hispanic youths reach middle school, many are underachieving or have been left back, and they begin to drop out. A third of all Hispanic dropouts leave school before they finish the 10th grade. The Hispanic high school completion rate is the lowest in the nation. In 1985 the percentage of Hispanics completing high school was 47.9 percent. The Black percentage was 59.8 percent, and the White percentage was 75.5 percent. Although there are no conclusive studies for the decade, available data show that dropout rates for Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans have been as high as 40 percent to 50 percent, while Cuban-Americans in the Miami area experienced an unprecedented 25 percent to 35 percent average. At the close of the decade, the resurgence and rapid growth of well-organized youth gangs that include significant numbers of young Hispanics seemed to correlate with the high Hispanic dropout rates.

College-level education figures in the '80s also showed a Hispanic decline. The Hispanic college enrollment rate dropped from 36 percent in 1976 to 27 percent in 1985. *In 1988 21 percent of non-Hispanics had four or more years of college; the figure for Hispanics was 10 percent.*

Bilingual education, a program strongly favored by

most Hispanics, was sharply criticized by non-Hispanics in the 1980s. Bilingual programs, deemed to be divisive, were attacked by the "Official English" and "English Only" groups. In the late 1980s the Reagan Administration responded to the controversy by allowing local districts to mount a variety of alternatives, such as English-as-a-Second-Language programs, to meet the needs of non-English-speaking students.

During the 1980s the debate over bilingual education was joined by the debate over the proposal to make English the nation's official language; both were handled with more heat than light.

"English Only," a well-organized, well-funded, national campaign, sought to make English the official language of the states and the nation. Decisive referendum victories in the key states of California and Florida, plus a vote of confidence from the U.S. Supreme Court on the constitutionality of the issue, made the official language initiative stronger than ever before in the history of the nation. Most Hispanics and many others regard the "English Only" philosophy as anti-pluralistic, anti-Hispanic, and—in essence—anti-American. The Hispanic-preferred alternative to "English Only" is "English Plus," a policy whereby English remains the primary unofficial language of the nation, but second languages are encouraged rather than suppressed. The issue has not been resolved, and Hispanic communities find themselves at the very center of a national controversy that is likely to outlast "the decade of Hispanics."

What about Cuban Americans?

"The decade of Hispanics" brought some significant changes that affected the Cuban American community.

For the first time since Castro's takeover, the United States ceased to grant automatic exile status to Cubans. Moreover, immigration from Cuba became a negotiating

tool between Castro and the U.S. government, and the deportation to Cuba of non-Mariel Cuban immigrants was publicly advocated and, on occasion, was carried out.

Anti-Cuban sentiment had its roots in (1) the post-Mariel prison riots and other events involving the 7,000-plus criminals Castro had sent to the United States, (2) the well-publicized fallout from drug trafficking on the part of Cubans and other Latins, and (3) the swelling of Miami's Hispanic communities by refugees from Mariel and from Central American countries. It must be noted that during the 1980s the non-Cuban Hispanic communities of Miami grew steadily, and today non-Cuban Hispanics represent a third of Miami's Hispanic population.

Not all the news was bad, however. The 1980s witnessed a large growth in the number and size of Cuban-owned businesses, mostly in Miami. Cubans advanced within corporate America, largely at the middle-management level. In relative terms, Cuban Americans outside the Miami area were more successful in reaching the top corporate echelons.

Cubans exerted considerable impact on the growth of Hispanic media and on advertising to the Hispanic markets. They opened up new channels of communication with many Hispanic and non-Hispanic businesses and community representatives throughout the United States.

The decade brought sustained increases in the number of Cuban American elected officials, particularly in the Miami area. For the first time, Cuban Americans were elected as city mayors: Jorge Valdes, Sweetwater, FL—who subsequently became the first Cuban American elected to the Metro-Dade County Commission; Raul Martinez, Hialeah, FL; Pedro Reboredo, West Miami, FL; Xavier Suarez, Miami, FL; and Roberto Menendez, Union City, New Jersey. Also, Roberto Casas became both the first Cuban American Florida State House Representa-

tive and State Senator, and Nick Navarro, the first Cuban American Sheriff of Broward County, FL. With few exceptions, Cuban Americans were elected in single-member districts and in cities with a majority of Hispanics. At the turn of the decade, however, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen was elected the first Cuban-born Member of the U.S. House of Representatives in a district where most voters were not Hispanic.

Aided by a strong economy at both the state and local levels, Cubans in South Florida sailed through the decade with consistently low unemployment rates. Miami's Latin businesses, based on a strong bilingual service economy, were highly instrumental in the absorption into the local labor market of thousands of new immigrants that arrived monthly from Cuba and Nicaragua.

Over the decade the median income of Cuban families changed little in relative terms. It remained above the level of other Hispanics—particularly Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans—and below the level of non-Hispanic Whites. The percentages of difference among the groups remained constant for the ten years.

But despite growth and achievement in political representation and in business and professional life, Cuban Americans experienced several social problems that had not previously affected them. For instance, in the middle of the decade, the dropout rate for Dade County's Hispanic students—most of whom are Cuban—neared 40 percent. At the same time the number of youth gangs in the county increased to more than 60, and it is estimated that nearly eight out of every ten gang members are Hispanic.

During the decade the tens of thousands of first-generation arrivals from Cuba who had settled in the Greater Miami area saw the birth of the third generation of Cuban Americans. The Cuban community in the 1980s truly began evolving into the Cuban *American* community, and Cuban Americans moved away from being a

single-issue constituency.

Although interest in anti-Castro politics persisted and continued to develop on both sides of the Florida straits, the 1980s witnessed a proliferation of Cuban American domestic concerns. Some of these issues and activities were responses to the problems cited above—school dropouts, Florida's language policy and legislation, and competition for local resources. Other activities emerged from cultural needs, such as parades, festivals and beauty pageants, and still others involving controversies over the arts. While Miami's Spanish media continued to follow events in Central America and to cosponsor fund-raisers for multiple humanitarian causes abroad, it also involved itself in domestic issues and participated in support of humanitarian causes in the United States.

Was It, Then, the Decade of Hispanics?

It seems unlikely that the 1980s or any other single period will become unequivocally "Hispanic." Progress and regress are two contradictory but nevertheless powerful currents that are transforming the Hispanic communities.

The lack of benchmarks and widely accepted national goals limits the assessment that can be made of the Hispanic performance in the 1980s. However, an informal survey of a significant number of Hispanics indicates that there is little support for the notion that the 1980s were in fact "the decade of Hispanics."

Instead, there seems to be a consensus that these were good years for the Hispanic media and market, and that definite political gains were made, even though Hispanics continue to be politically underrepresented.

On the other hand, most also agree that Hispanics suffered serious setbacks in the areas of education, income, and the public acceptance of cultural and linguis-

tic plurality. Indeed, it has been suggested that terming the period "the decade of Hispanics" may be one of the cruelest jokes ever perpetrated on the Hispanic community.

These views have been summarized outside a contextual framework for specific subgroups and issue areas, but they do suggest that many Hispanics would not give this decade a blanket endorsement, or even a passing grade.

Perhaps the most positive reflection on the 1980s is the fact that during the decade Hispanics became a visible part of American society.

The increase in political empowerment, the rise of a Hispanic market and entrepreneurship, and the emergence of a national Hispanic agenda are powerful developments that can support long-term Hispanic progress.

But sustained educational decline and the perpetuation and deepening of poverty are disturbing signs of long-term Hispanic stagnation.

It is the clash of these forces that most accurately defines the fate of Hispanics in the 1980s, a decade perhaps best termed *"The Elusive Decade of Hispanics."*

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